

The Soccer War

Everybody knows that Ohio State and Michigan don't like each other very much, but what if a game caused a shooting war that resulted in hundreds of thousands of displaced refugees and thousands of people being hacked to death by axes and swords or lined up and machine-gunned by firing squads?

Never happen, you say, and you're probably right. Internecine slaughter between Americans is unheard of (except for the Civil War ha-ha!). But what about a dirt-poor region of the world where the population is in cutthroat competition for a postage stamp-sized piece of arable terrain on which to grow a few beans or stalks of corn, where people, squeezed out by a medieval landowning oligarchy of soulless latifundistas backed up by a heartless military, are pitched against each other in a pressure cooker atmosphere of Darwinian survival of the fittest?

National rivalries are sometimes translated onto the soccer pitch, where matches are frequently surrogated for national or ethnic hostilities. But sometimes a playing field is not a large enough arena to contain the antagonisms or even hatreds that lie not very far beneath the thin skin of nation states. Witness the riots that have plagued English soccer since the Elizabethan age, which continue to terrorize Europe even unto this "civilized" era. There is evil in the hearts of men (and surely in women as well) that cannot be subsumed on the fields of athletic competition.

The monstrous reality is that we are not long descended from the apes in the trees and any pretext for barbarity is a welcome diversion from the narrow parameters of civilized behavior. The tools of athletic competition certainly play their part, which explains the brisk trade in baseball bats in countries that have never seen a baseball.

This monstrous rule-of-thumb has one of its most lamentable examples in the ugly little war that broke out between the Central American republics of El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, ostensibly as a result of an elimination series between those two countries for the honor of advancing to the 1970 World Cup tournament in Mexico City.

Maybe if the World Cup had been scheduled for Australia or Italy instead of the apex of Latin American civilization the competitive pressure on the two teams might not have been so pronounced. As the undisputed capital of Latin American cultural, political, artistic and intellectual life, Mexico City holds an irresistible allure for all the nations from the Río Grande to the barren wastes of Tierra del Fuego, and playing the World Cup there was certainly the Holy Grail of every country's sporting imagination. But even barring that, El Salvador and Honduras already had a plateful of contentious issues to dispute.

By far the biggest was the agricultural terrain of Honduras, a large portion of which had been invaded and populated over succeeding generations by waves of Salvadoran immigrants who had been squeezed out of that region's most densely populated country by a lack of land to farm because of the inequitable distribution which favored the large landowners.

This insalubrious conjuncture of unfortunate pressures was destined to percolate down to the pitch. The series was a best of three games with the first to be played in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, where disturbances broke out, but the situation worsened considerably at the second game in San Salvador. Honduran fans were beat up, the Honduran flag and national anthem were insulted and the emotions of both nations became considerably agitated. As a result, actions against Salvadoran citizens in Honduras became increasingly more violent and a large number of Salvadorans were brutalized or killed. Tens of thousands of Salvadorans resident in Honduras were forced to flee the country with no possessions.

As might be imagined, the press of both countries, controlled by the oligarchies and happy to distract attention from the usual litany of normal miseries, whipped the populace into a murderous frenzy. Groups of Hondurans armed with machetes stormed into areas populated by Salvadorans and butchered hapless bystanders. The Salvadoran air force staged bombing raids and a Salvadoran armored column fought its way into the Honduran capital. Thousands died and thousands more were wounded and maimed until, after four days of barbaric butchery, the OAS was able to negotiate a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Salvadoran forces from Honduran territory.

El Salvador won the third and decisive playoff game, which had to be played on Mexican territory, and went on to play in the World Cup in Mexico City the following year, where they were eliminated after losing to Mexico and the Soviet Union in the group stage. Brazil won the World Cup after beating Italy 4-1 at Azteca Stadium, and Pelé won the Outstanding Player Medal.

It really happened!